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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest is intended to help eligible school library personnel write an effective proposal for the "Improving Literacy Through School Libraries" (LSL) grant program, which provides funding for high-need K-12 school library programs to improve reading achievement by providing students with increased access to school library materials, to technologically advanced school libraries, and to certified school librarians. Eligibility for the program and components of the application are summarized. The LSL evaluation criteria for each of the following sections are described: (1) Meeting the Purpose of the Statute; (2) Need for School Library Resources; (3) Use of Funds; (4) Use of Scientifically Based Research; (5) Broad-Based Involvement and Coordination; and (6) Evaluation of Quality and Impact. (MES)

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The Improving Literacy through School Libraries Program of *No Child Left Behind:*

Tips for Writing a Winning Grant Proposal

By Marcia A. Mardis

For the past two years, the U.S. Department of Education has awarded over 150 grants between $20,000 and $350,000 to high-need school library programs to improve reading achievement by providing students with increased access to school library materials, to technologically advanced school libraries, and to certified school librarians. The Improving Literacy Through School Libraries (LSL) program (www.ed.gov/programs/lsl/index.html) is part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, better known as *No Child Left Behind* (www.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA02/pg7.html). Since this funding is highly competitive, very targeted, and focused on schools that often do not have access to grantwriting assistance, this ERIC Digest will help eligible high-need school library personnel to write an effective proposal for this unique grant program.

The LSL program restricts eligibility based on institutional and socioeconomic status. The applicant must be a local educational agency (LEA), as defined in section 9101 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. School districts are the most familiar form of LEAs. Some charter schools in some states are also considered LEAs. Individual schools and private schools are not eligible to apply for a grant or to receive services through an eligible LEA for this program. Eligible LEAs are those in which at least 20 percent of the students served are from families with incomes below the poverty line. This criterion is very strictly enforced. The LSL section of U.S. Department of Education includes a listing of eligible districts (www.ed.gov/programs/lsl/eligibility.html). Proposals are reviewed annually. LSL application materials (visit www.ed.gov/programs/lsl/resources/html for guidebook) are released in February or March; awards are made in August.

While any education stakeholder can submit an Improving Literacy Through School Libraries application as long as it is signed by the district superintendent, the process benefits from intense collaboration among school librarians, grant writers, teachers, and administrators. Applications not borne of an integrated approach to the proposed work often reflect fragmented ideas and unclear implementation plans.

Applications must include an abstract, program narrative, budget narrative, and resumes for key personnel. The focus of the peer review process is primarily on the program narrative, but since both the peer reviewers and LSL Program personnel see the entire application package, it is essential that all documents be completed accurately and attentively.

LSL Evaluation Criteria

Peer reviewers are guided by a single question, "How does this proposal increase student literacy?" Likewise, this question should guide the conception of a proposal and the articulation of its components.

In order to be competitive, the program narrative should address the evaluation criteria completely and explicitly. It is a good idea to present the proposal in order of the evaluation criteria, even if the pieces of the proposal are actually written in a different sequence. Point assignments for the elements should also guide development of each proposal criterion.

1. Meeting the purpose of the statute (10 points).

This criterion reflects how well the proposed project addresses the intended outcome of the statute to improve student literacy skills and academic achievement by providing students with increased access to library materials; a well-equipped, technologically advanced school library; and certified school librarians.

In this section, the proposer should provide a "big picture" of project activities and how those activities specifically reflect the LSL statute. Proposers *do not* need to submit applications that work in all three areas (library materials, technology, school librarians); focusing on one or two areas may be an effective way to construct a proposal that is realistic for the grants' twelve-month funding period.

2. Need for school library resources (10 points).

This section should be used to establish the deficiencies in the district's library program that demand attention. Proposals will be scored on the need for school library improvement, based on age and condition of school library resources, level of access to advanced technology, and availability of certified school librarians.

Reviewers will be assessing how well the narrative explains the ways in which funds will increase student literacy. The LSL program staff weeds out proposals submitted by ineligible applicants, so there's no need to document your district's socioeconomic condition. Be sure to include information about student reading levels; book collection age, size, and coverage; number of computers in school libraries; and number of certified librarians. Explain how these conditions affect school library operations and what areas need improvement, and identify missing services that affect student reading. State or local budget cuts alone do not justify funds from the LSL program.

3. Use of funds (35 points).

This criterion evaluates how well the applicant will use funds to carry out needed activities. The narrative should include a detailed action plan that describes how the use of school libraries will improve student literacy. This plan should outline concrete objectives that the proposed program will achieve. Applications must make the connection between program activities and LSL goals explicit (McGowan, 2002).

Reviewers will also be evaluating use of funds with the budget. Be sure that every specified use of funds is also listed and described in the budget. For example, a narrative that proposes to greatly extend library hours but does not describe how staff will be paid for these extended hours may be penalized.

A common area of expenditure is acquiring current school library resources. While the grant application should not specify book titles that will be purchased, the narrative should address categories in which materials will be bought. These categories should be addressed in the proposal narrative as areas of need or areas that enhance reading achievement.

While funds can be spent on computer equipment and software, it is essential that the link between technology and increased literacy be made. Proposals that focus solely on replacing outdated computers or purchasing color printers are rarely persuasive. Requested technology should be incorporated into the curricula of the school and used to develop and enhance the information literacy, information retrieval, and critical think-

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ing skills. Requests for funds to implement an automated circulation system are also not encouraged unless a link is established between improved circulation practices and improved reading achievement.

Technology can also be used to facilitate Internet resource-sharing networks among schools and school libraries, and other libraries. While this provision was originally included to bridge any connectivity gaps, requests for funds relating to the Internet should focus on using the Internet for resource sharing activities like interlibrary loan and literacy-improving activities like viewing eBooks or participating in online work.

Professional development is an often misunderstood aspect of the LSL program. According to section 1222(d)(2) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (more popularly known as *No Child Left Behind*), professional development for school librarians and other instructional staff may be funded for skills in **preschool** age children's early literacy development. Professional development funds may also be used for activities that foster increased collaboration. Shared planning time, joint teaching strategies, and plans for integrated use of the school library are types of allowable professional development activities.

Funds may also be sought to offset costs of providing students with access to school libraries during non-school hours. The proposal text should clearly state the types of activities that will occur during additional hours as well as a staffing plan for additional time.

Using funds to hire additional media specialists is not prohibited, but does have its drawbacks. Since the grants are only for twelve months, the proposers need to address how quickly new staff can be hired, trained, and integrated into program activities. Proposers will also want to address how new staff people will be retained beyond the duration of the grant.

Remember, specify what actions the district's school libraries will take to improve reading skills with the LSL funds. Since the LSL operates from the perspective that libraries are funded to improve reading literacy, not information literacy, it's not enough to list books and materials.

4. Use of scientifically based research (10 points).

This section determines how well the applicant will use programs and materials that are grounded in scientifically based research, as defined in section 9101(37) of the ESEA, in carrying out the proposed activities. Although this section is not assigned a high number of points, it is a clear reflection of how well-thought out proposed activities are.

In this area, it is not adequate to cite school library achievement studies without linking them to proposed activities. Likewise, citing promotional literature or anecdotal accounts of a particular reading program's effectiveness does not demonstrate how specific proposed activities were selected for their basis in scientific research. Literature cited should document the program activities' ability to improve phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension strategies.

Take some time with this section! Show that the proposed program is based on objective, rigorous, and scientifically proven research. Let the literature guide program decisions instead of trying to find research that supports proposed work. Many reviewers feel that good, thorough reference to relevant literature reflects an applicant's ability to make thoughtful, informed program decisions.

5. Broad-based involvement and coordination (15 points).

This section addresses how well the applicant will extensively involve school librarians, teachers, administrators, and parents in the proposed program and effectively coordinate LSL funds and activities provided with other district initiatives.

While not all stakeholders (parents, teachers, students, administrators, etc.) need to be involved in every aspect of the proposed work, applicants should demonstrate a willingness to include them. Teachers may contribute to the grant writing process, parent volunteers may assist with staffing after school hours, and administrators may help to implement the project evaluation. Be creative in determining different roles everyone can play and look upon collaboration as a way to diffuse project responsibility rather than to slow project progress.

Another important aspect of this section is to discuss how the proposed work will complement existing district reading programs and professional development initiatives. Take an inventory of the programs in the district and look at the gaps—these gaps should be included in the Needs for School Library Resources section. Once needs are identified, decide which of them can be addressed through program activities. Include these decisions in the Meeting the Purpose of the Statute and Use of Funds sections. Then, research possible approaches to these activities and select the ones best suited to the district environment. Include these references in your Use of Scientifically Based Research section. Identify relevant and readily available pieces of data that will help to inform the selected approaches. Combine these data with goals and measurements — this is the Evaluation of Quality and Impact section. Characterizing involvement and existing efforts can actually be the first step to constructing an effective proposal!

6. Evaluation of quality and impact (20 points).

The evaluation plan must address the objectives and impact of the project. Measure the extent to which availability of, access to, and use of school library resources were increased and how these factors improved student reading skills. Applicants should describe baseline data like circulation and user statistics and state clear benchmarks of significant improvement.

Evaluation plans should include both formative (ongoing) and summative (final) elements. Ongoing measures should include plans to feed formative analysis results back into program implementation. Proposals also must include methods of assessing the program's impact on reading achievement. While this area may seem difficult to evaluate, Evidence-Based Practice may help to guide the process. Evidence-Based Practice is comprised of identifying goals, developing processes and strategies, examining outcomes and successes, and evaluating practices critically and reflectively in the light of outcomes (Todd, 2002; Todd, 2002).

Summative evaluations often take the form of a final report. This report should document the program goals, baseline data, results of the formative analyses, and interim program adjustments. The report should reflect how much progress the program made toward its goals.

Be willing to document places in which the program did not meet expectations and to suggest changes for future implementations. Program development is a learning process that benefits from collaboration, communication, and reflection.

Conclusion

It is essential that potential applicants understand the program elements and assemble a coalition and proposal strong enough to gain the reviewers' attention and support student achievement.

Grant writing is often misunderstood as a combination of luck, prescience, and alchemy. But, often, the secret to writing effective proposals is to learn how to present needs in the grantor's structure. Elements should be addressed in a logical order and presented in the requested sequence. Deeper knowledge of this program's evaluation criteria will result in proposals that reflect an appropriate mixture of clarity and purpose. Remember the most important question for you proposal to answer is, "Does it improve student reading literacy?"

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